DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 700 CS 207 992

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TITLE Values Clarification Through Writing.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Exercise Exchange; v27 n1 p37-38 Fall 1982

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; Higher Education; High Schools; Learning Activities; Teaching Methods; *Values Clarification; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS PF Project

ABSTRACT

An approach to using values clarification exercises in a college freshman composition or a high school English class is presented in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): Since the integration of writing and thinking is vital in the development of writing abilities, the values clarification experience is a natural bridge for students to receive exposure to both processes. THE ACTIVITY (excerpt): Students are presented with ten values (freedom, peace, sincerity, social success, faith, wealth, happiness, love, health, friendship) written on the blackboard, and are asked to rank order the ten elements. They then select a partner and in a limited amount of time they are required to formulate a composite ranking that both partners agree on. We then analyze the rankings. Each student is then required to complete a writing assignment. Within the essay format, students develop a personal definition for the term "value"; discuss how they determine whether a concept is of value to them; speculate about the origin of values by probing whether values are learned or biologically inherited; and examine how society transmits values through cultural, political, and religious institutions. The in-class discussion and the writing activity stimulate a definition and discussion of values as concepts with application to everyday life. (HC)

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Values Clarification Through Writing

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Level:

College freshman composition course or senior high school English class.

Author's Comment

The idea for a writing activity based on values clarification originated in a graduate course on group theory and practice. Although the original experience dealt solely with the dynamics of group decision making and individual decisions regarding group definition and priority, I have since modified the original exercise to work in a writing course.

General Approaches

As my freshman composition course proceeds through a developmental sequence of writing tasks, a need for a creative approach to the introduction of expository writing becomes apparent. Since the integration of writing and thinking is recognized as vital in the development of writing abilities, the values clarification experience presents itself as a natural bridge for the students to receive exposure to both processes. It also allows the complete language experience: thinking, speaking, listening, writing, reading. This cross-nurturing helps students to identify, accept and express their ideas and feelings concerning their values. It further introduces them to the process of self-appraisal and conceptual reflection which is the hallmark of intellectual and cognitive maturity.

The Activity

Students are presented with ten values (freedom, peace, sincerity, social success, faith, wealth, happiness, love, health, friendship) written randomly by the instructor on the blackboard. I emphasize to the class that the order in which the elements are listed does not in any way convey a sense of ordered importance. Individually, working alone, the students are asked to rank order the ten elements from most important (#1) to least important (#10). The students then select a partner and in a limited amount of time (approximately 15-20 minutes) they are required to formulate a composite ranking that both partners agree on. After the working time has elapsed, the students list their composite rankings on the blackboard. The lists are numbered and identified by the first names of the students in the dyads. We then analyze the rankings.

An instructor may utilize any procedure for this analysis. For instance, I begin by examining what values are placed first. Then we usually look at the top three choices across all the groups. An individual value or set of values might be isolated and their placement examined. Some interesting linkages might be explored (e.g. wealth and social success, freedom and peace, love and friendship, health, etc.) One or both partners are asked to explain the ranking of a particular value. An examination/debriefing of the process for achieving a consensus is also conducted. How did the dyads arrive at their decisions? Were certain values easier to rank than others? (Implicit in this question is whether it is easier to rank extremes than it is to decide the middle rankings.) What role did compromise play in the composite ranking? Did students "trade off" the placement of one value for another? Were there instances of "natural" agreement? Were there instances when no agreement was possible? Why? or Why not?

Exercise Exchange v27 n1 p37-38
Fall 1982

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Since I have utilized this activity for five years, I share the various rankings that have occurred throughout this time span as a concluding portion of the in-class discussion. In examining these past decisions, we explore the impact of societal influences on individual value choices and the implication of developing and integrating individual priorities with those of peers, family, and community.

The Writing Assignment

Based on the individual ranking and class discussion, each student is then required to complete a writing assignment. Within the essay format, students are asked to develop a personal definition for the term "value"; to discuss how they determine whether a concept is of value to them and how they arrive at such a decision; to speculate about the origin of values by probing whether values are learned or biologically inherited; and to examine how society transmits values through cultural, political, and religious institutions. In addition, students are asked to explain the reasons for their first three choices which they listed in their individual rankings. They are asked to present their rationale in a logical and complete discussion and to outline the sequencing of their choices.

Assessment

The in-class discussion and writing activity stimulate a definition and discussion of values as concepts with application to everyday life, career, family, and social concerns. There emerges an articulation of the relationships among different categories of values based on the definitions provided by the students. The assignment encourages students to appraise their judgments in relation to specific times, places, and other environmental and cultural influences.